WEEKEND JOURNAL.

ASIA

Best-Picture Show

Our Academy Award outlook

Inside: What's next in luxury

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This page (left to right): Pierre-Alexis Dumas (Samantha Sin for The Wall Street Journal); Alex Law and Mabel Cheung (Associated Press)

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THE JOURNAL CROSSWORD / Edited by Mike Shenk

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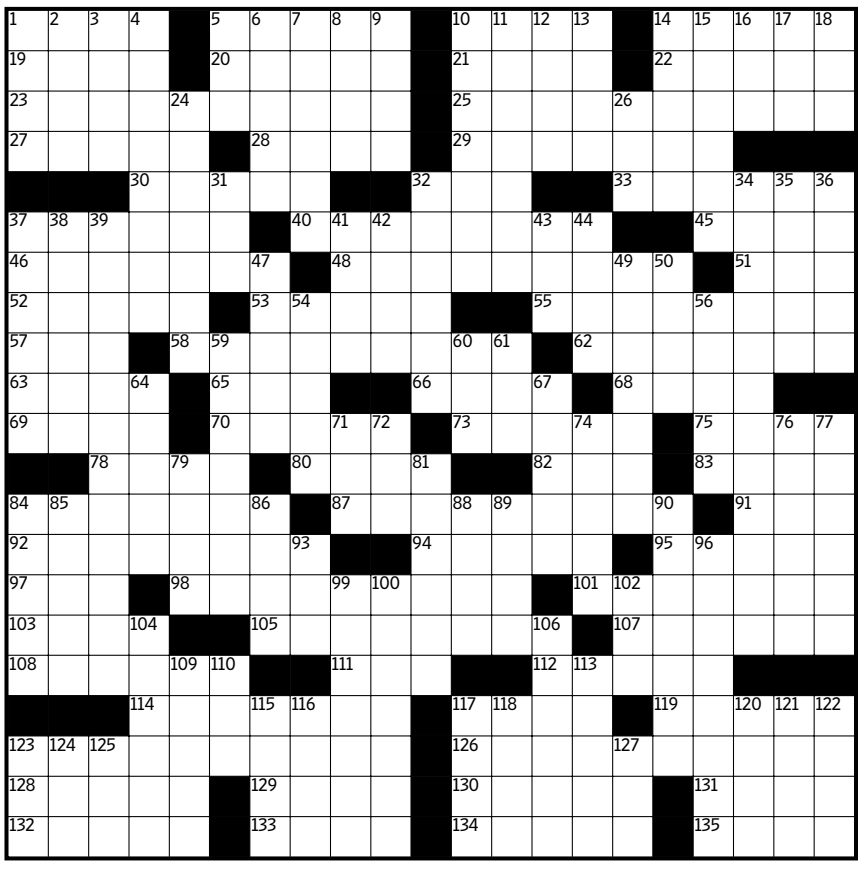
And the Nominees Are... / by Pancho Harrison



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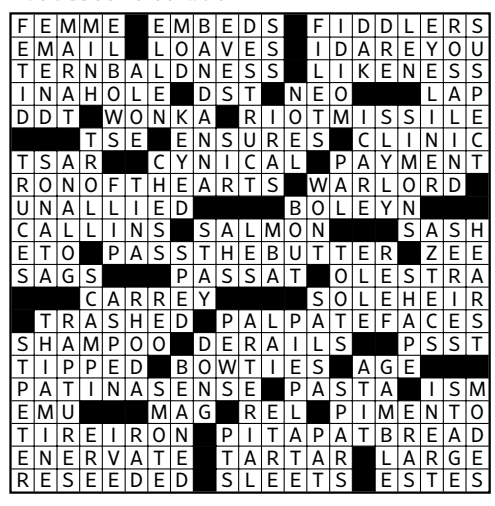

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Hanging on a thread

Italy's fabric makers compete with ever-more innovative textiles

By Christina Binkley

Ponzone, Italy

Lanvin is among the labels—along with Chanel, Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Akris, Kiton and Balenciaga—that turn to Lanificio Egidio Ferla SpA, for fabrics that define luxury.

Italian fabrics were a central part of the collections at Milan fashion week, which ended Wednesday, just as they are at Paris fashion week, which began Tuesday and ends March 10.

Many top designers rely on these high-end textiles to create their most luxurious or unusual looks, such as Etro's brilliant jewel-like colors, some of Chanel's famous tweeds, and the color-morphing looks shown at Prada several seasons ago. More recently, at New York's fashion week, where sumptuous textiles took center stage, Italian makers supplied fabric for Michael Kors, Jason Wu, Nanette Lepore and Carolina Herrera, among countless others. Ms. Lepore, who showcased a unique tapestry print in New York, says she uses almost entirely Italian fabrics. "We need these Italian factories," she says.

Designers turn to factories here in the Biella region of northern Italy for the highest-quality suiting textiles—cashmere, silk, linen and wools, including Loro Piana's vicuña and Ferla's baby alpaca. The fabric is then shipped to factories around the world for manufacturing. Other regions of Italy have their own textile specialties; Como is known for shirt fabrics and Prato for fancy womenswear fabrics. But all are united by Italy's reputation for fabric quality and innovation. "We are not afraid of making special qualities, special colors," says Paolo Ferla, grandson of the company's founder.

Yet a drive through the Alpine hills here reveals a startling amount of abandoned industrial real estate—dozens upon dozens of crumbling textile factories built along the streams that once powered the mills. The vacant buildings are the result of many years of low-priced competition from other countries, mainly China.

Ferla hopes to produce only 150,000 meters of fabric this year, down from 250,000 meters in the 1980s. Indeed, sales in the Italian textile industry have slumped at least 30% since 2008.

"Horrible. Horrible, horrible year," Mr. Ferla says from his sprawling factory, which has ample unused space. Yet in keeping with Italian tradition, he hasn't laid off any of his firm's 35 employees, many of whom have extensive ties to the company.

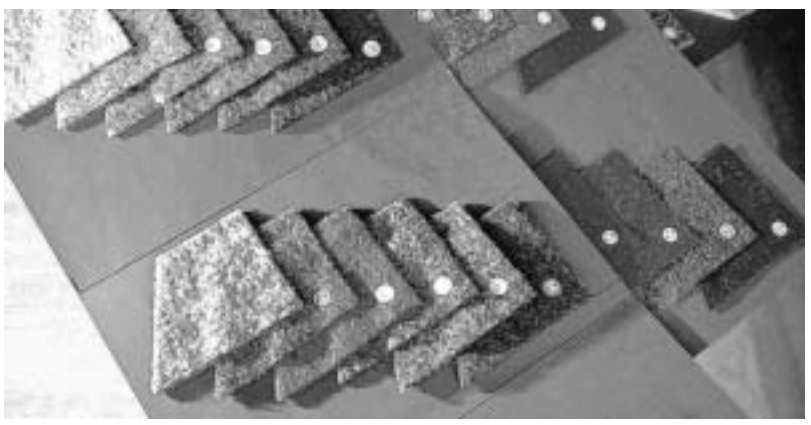
Outside Italy, there are some signs that the fashion industry is picking up steam. U.S. apparel sales declined 5.1% in 2009, but there were glimmers of improvement in womenswear in the fourth quarter, according to NPD Group research. And many U.S. retailers have been posting improved results in recent months.

Still, consumers have been demanding cheaper clothes, and one way retailers have achieved their improved results is by pressuring apparel manufacturers to lower prices by more than 20% for each of the past two seasons. Many have done so by moving more production to China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other low-labor-cost regions of the world.

Textile makers can't match China's relatively cheap labor. But Mr. Ferla and other fabric makers in this region can compete by being willing to fill small orders and offering special colors, new weaves and patterns, and even new fibers. A decade ago, Mr. Ferla innovated the use of baby alpaca, which is softer than cashmere. He comes out each season with new variations on tweed-like fabrics thrust through with various colors of thread. Italian textile makers also have created techniques such as an extra twist in the thread that offers more stretch, new methods of combing bouclé to make it soft, or spinning tiny threads together to make extraordinarily soft wools.

Many designers at New York fashion week experimented with Italian fabrics to create textured looks such as Nanette Lepore's tapestry print tunic and Carolina Herrera's pantsuit (right and far right). Textile makers such as Ferla (color samples below) are known for innovations such as using baby alpaca wool. Francesco Barberis Canonico (below right) runs a family firm that makes suit fabrics for Brooks Brothers and Hickey Freeman. Above, a woman mends fabric at Vitale Barberis Canonico's finished-fabric inspection department.

Associated Press (models); Alessandro Scotti for The Wall Street Journal (factory shots)



Yet factories in China are proving as adept at copying fabrics as films and handbags, which is pressuring the Italians.

While worried, Mr. Ferla is relying on his quality-focused business strategy. It has never been more important "for us to maintain the quality and the innovation of production," he says. Then he quotes Dostoevsky: "Beauty will save the world."

"If we lose the Italian mills, we lose the creativity needed for fashion," says Sal Giardina, an adjunct professor of textiles at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. "Fabrics are the common denominator of fashion. From birth to death, we are never more than three feet away from a textile product."

Just a few kilometers from Ferla, Francesco Barberis Canonico's family firm is churning out light wool suit fabrics for customers including Brooks Brothers and Hickey Freeman. With 320 employees, Vitale Barberis Canonico SpA is 10 times the size of Ferla. These days, about 20% of its production is sent to China, where factories will sew it into clothes, says Mr. Barberis Canonico, whose family started in the textile business in 1663.

The factory is heavily mechanized, with robots that move thread and materials around the floor and a dye plant that works all night without human intervention. The company invests about $6.8 million in new machinery each year, he says, in order to keep up with innovations in technology. Yet the company's revenue has been hit hard recently, dropping to $81 million in 2009 from $122 million in 2007.

Vitale Barberis Canonico starts with soft cottony bales of raw wool, combing them successively into ribbons that become the threads that are dyed and later woven.

Mr. Barberis Canonico, who is 37 years old, was sent to school in England as a boy and spent his 20s living it up in London. He returned to the family fold a decade ago. "People say, 'It's only fabric,'" he says. "I say, 'Excuse me, fabric is the most important thing.'"

Hot handbags

By placing early bets on purses, Bottega Veneta boosted its sales

By Christina Passariello

Milan

Last week, fashionistas got their first glimpse of Bottega Veneta's winter handbags at fashion week here. But well before, the Italian fashion house had already bet on what the hottest bags would be.

As Bottega pursues its strategy to grow from a niche player into a global brand, it has been conducting a major overhaul to its business, starting from the production line. As part of that, it now decides well before its catwalks what—and how much—to manufacture and send to stores.

It's a significant switch for the Italian fashion house. Part of PPR SA's Gucci Group empire, Bottega is following in the footsteps of other big luxury brands that are now as focused on the nuts-and-bolts of their businesses as their signature looks. For a few years, Louis Vuitton has been modeling its production on that of Japanese car manufacturers.

For more than four decades, Bottega catered to a small, elite clientele happy to pay more than $1,500 for one of its leather bags and to sign up for waiting lists if the purses weren't available. Like other fashion houses, it wouldn't start manufacturing until days after a fashion show, after buyers placed orders. The company would rush to make bags and then slump into a long lull. Deliveries were often late, resulting in lost sales. "We had huge peaks and troughs of work before," Bottega Veneta Chief Executive Marco Bizzarri says in an interview.

Many smaller niche brands still hew to a more artisanal style of production. But Bottega no longer falls into that category. In recent years the fashion house's sales have grown exponentially, driven by the popularity of its plain, soft-woven leather handbags as an understated alternative to the glitzy branded looks of Gucci and Vuitton. Since Gucci acquired it in 2001, Bottega's sales, which are mostly driven by bags, have grown tenfold to $547 million last year, causing it to leapfrog over Yves Saint Laurent to become Gucci's second-largest brand in sales, behind only the namesake Gucci label.

Last year, Mr. Bizzarri asked Bottega's designer, Tomas Maier, to decide which parts of the collection might sell best. Based on Mr. Maier's picks—which included the classic Cabat bag in a tie-dye color—Mr. Bizzarri told his production team to start manufacturing weeks before anything was shown to retailers.

Mr. Bizzarri says the change sped up delivery times by between 30 and 45 days and Bottega's goods were nearly all on time. By ordering leather early, Mr. Bizzarri says he also got better-quality materials; it made life easier for his small suppliers, too, by smoothing out their production cycles. He adds that the change helped Bottega's sales rise 5.1% in the fourth quarter of last year.

The new approach has potential pitfalls. By deciding its production schedule before department stores have had a chance to look at a collection, Bottega could wind up saddled with unwanted inventory. "It can be super risky," Mr. Bizzarri acknowledges.

In the wake of the economic crisis, what happens long-term remains to be seen. With its understated design—the bags have no logos—Bottega meshes with consumers' current desire for understated luxury. But Bottega lacks the history and cachet of older brands such as Hermès or Chanel. "In terms of style, they're in sync with the market," says Luca Solca, a luxury-goods analyst for Sanford Bernstein in London. Yet consumers want the reassurance of the most-established brands during a downturn, for quality and timelessness. "Consumer conservatism shifts demand to megabrands." Despite the fourth-quarter jump in sales last year, Bottega Veneta's annual revenue growth ground to a halt in 2009.

Mr. Bizzarri says Bottega is setting out to expand its product range, which already includes bags, shoes, clothing, jewelry and even furniture. The fashion house will launch its first perfume next year. Watches could follow; Mr. Bizzarri is in negotiations with a watchmaker to make Bottega Veneta watches under license.

Bottega Veneta

Marco Bizzarri, above, Bottega Veneta's chief executive; and the company's bags, from top: Intreccio Sfrangiato Shiny Calf Aquatre; Cocco Lave; and Intrecciato Nappa Veneta

Rachel McGinn

Janie Shoenborn, design director for Lilly Pulitzer, embraces bold, look-at-me prints.

How to wear it loud and proud

By Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan

Janie Shoenborn, design director for Lilly Pulitzer, has been drawn to "statement" clothing—bold, eye-catching pieces—and look-at-me prints since age 6, when she picked out a bathing suit with an all-over jelly-bean pattern.

"I am, like, Miss Statement Clothing," says Ms. Shoenborn, 37 years old. "I adore things that are over the top."

Still, she sticks to a strategy with statement pieces. For starters, she generally wears only one loud piece at a time. "You want someone to say, 'I love your blouse,'" she says, "but if you're wearing it with a necklace and bracelet that are also statement pieces, [people] won't know where to look."

Ms. Shoenborn tries to pair more striking pieces with basic items, such as clothing in black or white or accessories in gold, which she says will "ground" an outfit. For example, she will pair a "crazy-patterned dress" with black opaque tights, a brightly colored tunic or blouse with white jeans, or a chunky, eye-catching necklace with a plain white dress.

One of her favorite items is a pair of Michael Kors platform shoes that are jade green and gold and have a dramatic cut-out heel. When she decides to wear those shoes, she'll let them "take center stage," pairing them with slim black pants, a crisp white shirt and minimal gold jewelry that picks up on the heel color.

Ms. Shoenborn sometimes dares to wear two bold patterns together. When she does, she makes sure to keep the color of both items "in color tones of the same family," she says, adding, "You don't want to go too far and be cartoony." She'll wear a navy blue print with a turquoise pattern, for example, or pair hot pink with light pink. Another option is to wear two patterns that share one color, which "ties the outfit together."

For women who are nervous about making too big a statement, Ms. Shoenborn suggests experimenting with jewelry. "It doesn't take over your entire outfit," she says. Whatever attention-grabbing piece you choose, "you have to wear it with confidence," she says. "If you don't, then it's no fun at all."

WHAT'S NEXT

Samantha Sin for The Wall Street Journal

PIERRE-ALEXIS DUMAS

By Alexandra A. Seno

Pierre-Alexis Dumas embraces innovation. But as the sixth-generation member of his family to lead, in his case, the creative end of the French luxury house Hermès, he must uphold tradition, as well.

Best known for its leather goods such as the Birkin bag, Hermès—which began in 1837 as a saddle shop in Paris—currently has 17 departments creating products that range from perfume, apparel and tableware to jewelry, cashmere throws and yes, saddles. Over the past two years Mr. Dumas, as the company's artistic director, has expanded Hermès's offerings to include a $7.6 million helicopter, a $2.1 million car and a $109 million yacht.

"My grandfather used to tell me luxury is what you can repair," says the 43-year-old Mr. Dumas.

Indeed, many Hermès bags have been handed down from mother to daughter to granddaughter. But to stay relevant to today's affluent consumers, many of whom are defined by a culture of pomp and flash, Hermès and others must play along.

Mr. Dumas graduated from Brown University in the U.S. with a degree in visual arts and has worked at Hermès—first in Paris, then Hong Kong and London—since 1993. As head of the company's Asian subsidiaries from 1996 to 1998, he presided over the opening of the first Hermès store in China in 1997.

Time being the ultimate luxury, Mr. Dumas recently took some to have tea with Weekend Journal Asia in Hong Kong, and he shared his thoughts on the future of luxury. He is married with three children under the age of 12, and when he can, he likes to paint at a studio he keeps in Paris.

Of all the things you're doing at the moment, what excites you most?

Working on large-scale design; until recently, the largest Hermès product was a suitcase.

And now?

We make a helicopter with a company called Eurocopter, a subsidiary of the European space agency. We don't just come in and do decoration. With a helicopter, the priority is that it flies. We improved the design. We thought of someone stepping into the helicopter, it's a delicate moment, so we added a step—it is a small detail that improves the performance. Recently Mr. [Minoru] Mori [the property tycoon] in Japan bought one, and he set up a small company that does a city transfer from the airport in Narita.

How many have you sold?

We've delivered two and we have six orders. We just launched it a year ago. We're not into volume, especially in this large-scale design. It's the level of quality.

And now you want to build yachts?

That's a very large-scale design.

What is the price tag on that?

Between €80 to €110 million ($109 million to $150 million). The industry standard is €1 million ($1.4 million) per meter. A super-yacht is about 100 meters long. Our boat, which we make with the Wally [yacht-building] company, is 56 meters. And this is why it's very original: Our boat is extremely wide.

We have this odd shape because we decided to [build a boat that would travel] slow....Speed is so passé. What is the luxury for tomorrow? One of them is time.

What do you think of our culture of constant change?

Last May, I bought a new portable computer. After a while, it broke down. It went to the computer doctors and I'm going to get a new one. They tell me, We can fix it but it's going to be more expensive than buying a new one. I have a problem with that. I feel that incredible sense of waste. Maybe we're going too fast, maybe there's a feeling of acceleration of everything. We have to slow down.

That said, do you have a favorite disposable object?

A pencil. If you throw your pencil away, it means you've used it. It means you've used your brain, your imagination, you've been writing and drawing.

What's next for your company?

Twenty years ago we did a hard-case suitcase in carbon fiber. It was quite innovative. I am very interested in expanding the line. We have to reinvent ourselves. If we launch a perfume and it is like what we did in the '70s, what's the point? We are constantly reassessing who we are. Hermès is going to expand more on space and home. If you have a very large boat, what are you going to put inside?

What is the relationship between art, creativity and luxury?

In the last 50 years there has been a shift from brand-centered companies to design-centered companies. People come to contribute to Hermès like it is a collective creative project. Jean Paul Gaultier [the designer of the company's fashion line] has his own brand, he does beautiful couture. At Hermès, he tries to express what the Hermès woman is. We continue to invite talents, fashion designers, architects, designers, to contribute to the Hermès project.

Alexandra A. Seno is a writer based in Hong Kong.

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▶ To see images of the Hermès car and yacht, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

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Honors lists

The restaurants of San Sebastián, Spain, are a treat for wine lovers

By Stan Sesser

San Sebastián, Spain

At a New Orleans restaurant in the mid-1980s, I saw a 1971 Trotanoy Bordeaux, a great wine of that vintage, listed for $19—$119 should have been more like it. I called the waiter over to order every bottle they had, wrapped to go. Sorry, the waiter replied, you have to drink what you order on the premises. So my friend and I stayed at Commander's Palace past midnight and consumed three bottles.

Those days of unexpected bargains are long gone. Or so I thought, until a recent dinner in San Sebastián in the Basque region of northeast Spain, one of the outstanding eating cities in the world.

I was looking over the lengthy wine list at Arzak, which has three Michelin stars and prices to match; its main courses range from $75 to $92, and that's a la carte. But there was another shocker pricewise. While so many restaurants use wine as a major profit center and never pass on to their customers the low prices they paid for their older wines, many of the older vintages at Arzak were actually cheaper than the current release.

For instance, the restaurant was asking $950 for the 2006 Mouton Rothschild, a famous first-growth Bordeaux, but only $700 for the 1970 Mouton, an excellent vintage. The 1970 should have been priced a lot higher than the 2006, due to its rarity and because it would taste expansive, not closed-in, like the too-young 2006.

I asked owner-chef Juan Mari Arzak what was going on. "These wines were bought long ago," he said, "some of them by my grandmother. We raise the prices a bit each year but not very much. We want people to enjoy the wine; that's the way it should be."

My dining companion, food and wine tour guide Gabriella Ranelli de Aguirre, an American who has lived in San Sebastián for two decades, said that keeping prices down for older vintages was typical of those San Sebastián restaurants that had been around for many years. Although it was 1 a.m., she insisted we drive to a restaurant called Rekondo.

We kept pounding on the door until the owner, 75-year-old Txomin Rekondo, appeared. His sleepiness vanished as soon as he heard that I was going to ask about wine, his favorite subject.

Mr. Rekondo started by handing me the thickest wine list I've ever seen, a 221-page ledger with each entry neatly handwritten. His cellar, he said, comprises 80,000 bottles in a series of underground rooms; when one room fills up, he simply has another one dug under the restaurant's parking lot. Rekondo itself features an outdoor terrace shaded by a huge tree, and a big grill separating two traditional dining rooms. But the first thing you see when you walk in is a wine bar, with wines offered by the glass.

When I looked at the prices, it was New Orleans all over again. The great 1970s Riojas of López de Heredia, a family-owned winery dating back more than 130 years, were priced between $54 and $81; by contrast, Per Se restaurant in New York offers two such vintages on its wine list for $575 each. (A spokesman for that Thomas Keller restaurant and its sister, French Laundry in California's Napa Valley, said: "Our international wine pricing includes the cost of importation, local distribution, taxes and oftentimes a broker fee, which typically triples the original price of the wine. In Europe, most restaurants can purchase directly from the winery, so are not subject to these costs.")

For the most expensive French wines, it might turn out to be cheaper for Americans to fly to Spain, have dinner at Rekondo, and fly back to the U.S., than to order the wine at their local upscale restaurant.

The bargains didn't end with Europe. The 1982 BV Private Reserve Georges de Latour, at that time one of California's outstanding Cabernets, was priced at $49. According to winesearcher.com, it sells for an average of $116 in U.S. wine stores that carry it—before any restaurant markup is imposed. Mr. Rekondo showed me around his complex of wine cellars, with dozens of classics, from an 1890 López de Heredia to an 1893 Mouton to a 1926 Haut-Brion, another first-growth Bordeaux.

"I opened this restaurant in 1964," he stated. "I started putting wines away immediately, because nobody collected wines at that point." Why has he left the prices so low? "For a long time we didn't raise the prices at all, but then we realized our customers wouldn't appreciate them unless they had a high price," he said. "So seven or eight years ago I raised all the prices. But we realized they couldn't be off the charts. We're looking to give satisfaction to our clients. That's important, isn't it?"

Mr. Rekondo has developed a way of dealing with a major problem when someone possesses 80,000 bottles of wine—the probability that some of them will get too old and begin to oxidize. He puts those wines he suspects have reached their time on a special list, with big discounts from the already low prices. The day I visited, that list, all from the 1970s and 1980s, ranged from $18 to $27. The food isn't that pricey either. Rekondo specializes in steak, and an entrecôte costs $27.

There's one piece of good news and two bits of bad news on Rekondo. The good: Mr. Rekondo's two daughters, Edurne and Lourdes, are active in the business. (Edurne, who shares her father's love of wine, has already defied tradition by scanning his handwritten wine list into a computer.)

Now the bad: You can't order wine to take back home. Everything has to be drunk at the restaurant.

Also, Mr. Rekondo says he's jacked up the prices of some of his favorites so that they won't sell—he can't bear to part with them. As an example, he points to Petrus, a Bordeaux from Pomerol, one of the most expensive wines in the world. The great 1982 vintage, he says, is €3,000, or a bit more than $4,000.

That price might not prove quite the deterrent he hopes. The French Laundry restaurant in Napa Valley has the wine on its list for $12,875.

Stan Sesser for The Wall Street Journal (2)

Among some 80,000 bottles of wine in the cellars of the San Sebastián restaurant Rekondo, above, are these two López de Heredia Riojas from the 1890s.

Alamy

Where to dine

Though San Sebastián, which has more Michelin stars per capita than just about any other city in the world, is a spread-out place, the core tourist area is concentrated around a U-shaped bay. (The broad beach is jammed in summer.) At the top right of the "U" is the Old City, where many of the tapas bars are clustered. Adjacent to the Old City, a promenade along the waterfront runs by high cliffs and an old fort.

Gabriella Ranelli de Aguirre, a San Sebastián-based food and wine guide, recommends four restaurants for bargain-priced old wines. Heading the list is Rekondo (57 Paseo de Igueldo; ☎ 34-943-212907). The others are Arzak (273 Avda. Alcalde Jose Elosegui; ☎ 34-943-278465), Akelarre (56 Paseo del Padre Orcolaga; ☎ 34-943-311209) and El Lagar (55 Zabaleta Kalea; ☎ 34-943-320329).

Arbitrage

Monthly car park

City	Currency	US$
Jakarta	308,333 rupiah	$33
Manila	2,479 pesos	$54
Bangkok	2,500 baht	$77
Shanghai	933 yuan	$137
Paris	€163	$222
Frankfurt	€220	$300
New York		$304
Brussels	€320	$436
Tokyo	¥54,250	$612
Hong Kong	HK$4,763	$614
Sydney	A$697	$629
London	£433	$651
Rome	€750	$1,022

Note: Covered garage in the central business district

NewsCom

Prices, including taxes, converted to the nearest U.S. dollar

Best-Picture Show

Our Academy Award outlook

By Joe Morgenstern

Just as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences hoped, there's something for everyone among the 20 movies vying for a best-picture Oscar. (That figure includes the 10 movies as they existed at the time of their release, plus the 10 cause célèbres they've become after months of hype, buzz, bookmakers' rankings and inevitable backlash.)

At least four of them—"The Blind Side," "District 9," "Precious" and "A Serious Man"—are beneficiaries of the expanded nominations, while all are potential victims of a preferential voting system that could produce an entirely unexpected winner. (In the past, each academy voter picked one film as best picture, and the film with the most votes won; this year, each ranked the 10 nominees in order, with a counting procedure that could hand the award to everyone's second choice.) It's the latest confirmation of the film-industry adage of screenwriter William Goldman: Nobody knows anything.

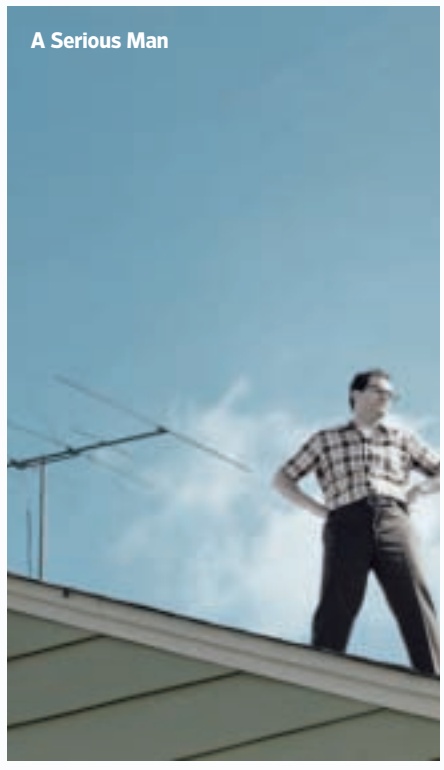
For me, though, this year's Oscars come down to a contest between two remarkably different films, "Avatar" and "The Hurt Locker." One is a huge and innovative studio production, the other a smallish-scale indie. (And one, of course, was made by the other's ex-spouse, which adds to the fun.) Yet both speak to modern audiences in the classic language of their genres.

"Avatar's" genre is the eye-popping, crowd-thrilling spectacle, and the man who made it is a direct descendant of such earlier kings of the movie world as D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille (as well as such disparate technical wizards as Buster Keaton and Stanley Kubrick). It's astonishing to see that James Cameron has done it again after taking more than a decade off for deep diving and deep thought.

The diving led to "Avatar" landscapes that are submarine seascapes drained of water. The thinking yielded sumptuous, info-dense visuals that herald a revolution in theatrical exhibition—wouldn't it be great if "Avatar" brought grownups back to theaters so they could see more grownup movies like "The Hurt Locker"?—together with a dramatic device that qualifies as a stroke of commercial genius.

To appreciate the artistic and fiscal power of this device, it helps to recall the one that made the crucial difference in "Titanic." The sinking of the unsinkable ocean liner had always been an enthralling story, but not, until Mr. Cameron came along, a story that would bring teenage girls and boys back for helping after helping of romance. In a general sense, he raised the barnacled vessel from its historical grave by focusing on the girl and boy played by you know who and you know who. But the sine qua non of his film's success, the billion-dollar notion that invited kids in, was the framing device with Rose, the fictional 101-year-old Titanic survivor recalling the great love of her passionate youth.

In "Avatar" the device is simpler still. By making Jake a paraplegic, Mr. Cameron provided the gate through which young audiences enter the picture quickly, at a deep emotional level. In recent interviews the filmmaker has spoken of his hero as an embodiment of "broken humanity," which he certainly is in an abstract way. More concretely, though, Jake uses the brilliant technology of the sci-fi tale to become a new person who finds both love and a cause that makes life worth living. In other words, he fulfills every adolescent's dream.


A Serious Man

On vacation last week in the remote South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, I ran into a couple of resident Aussies who said they'd seen "Avatar" and couldn't understand what the fuss was all about. In fact, they'd seen an illegal 2-D download on a notebook computer, so they hadn't seen it at all. Never has a movie depended so fully on the third dimension of depth, or the fourth dimension of screen size.

But the ensuing 3-D craze raises questions beyond the basic one of staying power. The process is desocializing. Those polarizing glasses are like visual headphones, separating us from other members of the audience while connecting us with the movie in an intense way. Is this good or bad for the medium's future? Maybe it's the best we can hope for, and a good best at that, since audiences these days are only loosely connected with one another as they sit in their seats, cellphones and texting thumbs at the ready in case the storyline sags.

The storyline never sags in "The Hurt Locker," a stunning example of another classic genre, action suspense. In this film the connection to the audience depends, at least at first, on the primal question of whether bombs will or won't explode.

But Kathryn Bigelow's tour de force is far more than a genre piece. It's a character study of remarkable complexity, a meditation on the nature of heroism, a consideration of the Iraq conflict that's neither anti-war nor pro, but cool, mature and incisive. And it's a showcase for elegant technique—rigorous direction, taut writing, flawless performances and masterful editing and cinematography. (Among so many vivid moments, I remember the shot of Jeremy Renner's James standing amid a lethal octopus's tentacles, seven pipe bombs

Below, Focus Features; Above, left to right, Lionsgate Films; Twentieth Century-Fox; Sony Pictures; Summit Entertainment; Disney/Pixar; Sony Pictures Classics; Weinstein Co.; Paramount Pictures; Warner Bros.

linked by live wires.)

That's why so many critics and movie professionals have rallied to its cause, and why Academy members honored it with nine nominations, a happy symmetry with "Avatar"—nine for the little film that could, nine for the big film that did.

From the day the nominations were announced, the temptation was to cast "The Hurt Locker" as a modestly funded David to "Avatar's" extravagant, entertainment-conglomerated Goliath. That's a fascinating spectacle in its own right, yet obvious differences between the two conceal essential similarities.

Despite its proudly independent roots, "The Hurt Locker" is a heartening throwback to the golden age of Hollywood, when studio films could aspire to such lean and disciplined excellence, and occasionally achieve it. Despite its astronomical budget and studio affiliations, "Avatar" is an indie film in the sense that the man who made it operates by his own rules.

Aspiration is the common denominator of the two productions. Mr. Cameron was outspoken, as is his custom, with his promises to transform the experience of watching movies in theaters, but damned if he didn't do it; against all odds, "Avatar" has lived up to its ballyhoo. Ms. Bigelow was no less ambitious, though she kept her intentions to herself. She simply took off for the Middle East and shot an exemplary feature that went into distribution ballyhooless, then earned richly deserved adulation on its own. (Mr. Cameron's championing of her cause as best director isn't just a special form of collegiality but an expression of excellent taste.)

So which of the two will be the winner? Unfortunately—or fortunately, if you're rooting for other nominees—it isn't that simple. Like the hovering spaceship in "District 9," there's that hovering question mark of preferential ballots. (Which wrist to slit first if "The Blind Side" wins?)

That's not to mention lots of inside-industry considerations that may have colored the Academy's voting. "The Hurt Locker" has come on so strongly, for so long, that some see it as vulnerable to an outsider move. (I see that kind of seeing as a symptom of the attention-deficit disorder that afflicts pop culture as a whole, though the perception could be self-fulfilling.) Actors, an important voting bloc, may turn out for "Inglourious Basterds," which celebrates the very notion of acting with a collection of fine performances. They may also turn against "Avatar," which represents a real threat to actors' livelihoods by blurring the line between live action and animation. What's more, Academy voters have often resisted popular films, so the stupendously popular "Avatar" may be perceived as too big not to fail in the best-picture category.

Then which of my two favorites do I really favor? In the accompanying box, which makes no provision for waffling, my answer is clear: "The Hurt Locker" should win, though "Avatar" will. Outside the box (where the best thinking is done), I'm of two minds, with no inclination to resolve the internal conflict. In the best of all possible worlds, "The Hurt Locker" should win because it's thrilling, engrossing and an impeccably crafted example of storytelling on the big screen. But in that same world, "Avatar" should win because it's the cavalry—on six-legged horses—come to the rescue of the movie medium, which has desperately needed the excitement that Mr. Cameron's majestic opus brings.

And in the world we actually inhabit? Nobody knows anything, and hope springs eternal.

The Oscar Scorecard

Here's how some think the races will shake out in four major Oscar categories. Wall Street Journal film critic Joe Morgenstern names those he thinks deserve to win and those he thinks the Academy will pick. Readers' choices are from a WSJ.com online poll; odds are offered by British betting and gambling company Ladbrokes.

Best Picture

	JOE MORGENSTERN SHOULD WIN	JOE MORGENSTERN WILL WIN	READER PICKS*	ODDS*	YOUR PICKS SHOULD WIN	YOUR PICKS WILL WIN
Avatar		✓	✓	6:5		
The Blind Side				100:1		
District 9				150:1		
An Education				150:1		
The Hurt Locker	✓			5:6		
Inglourious Basterds				14:1		
Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire				100:1		
A Serious Man				200:1		
Up				66:1		
Up in the Air				50:1		

Avatar — James Cameron kept saying it was going to be like nothing we'd ever seen, and what do you know? He kept his promise, in spades and in Imax.

The Blind Side — Many people, including me, were blindsided by this affecting film. A modestly manipulative fable about a gentle giant, it's the most obvious beneficiary of the expanded nomination scheme.

District 9 — A remarkable achievement—who could have imagined a brilliant satire of apartheid decked out as a sci-fi action adventure?—and a wonderfully appropriate nomination.

An Education — An education in elegant filmmaking. Too bad, though, that Alfred Molina wasn't nominated for his craven, class-conscious variation on the theme of Basil Fawlty.

The Hurt Locker — If all films were as good as this one, and as good at finding their audience on their own, the ranks of the movie-publicity companies would be decimated.

Inglourious Basterds — The shaggy-dog story as art. It opened while I was on vacation: I wish I could have been among the first to describe its mad pleasures.

Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire — The movie with the longest title faces very long odds, but has already beaten them by connecting with a broad public.

A Serious Man — My resistance to the Coen brothers' black comedy has been weakened by friends and colleagues who've taken it seriously, though I still haven't made it past the film's knee-jerk misanthropy.

Up — Imperfect Pixar still trumps most movies of the moment. What remains most resonant in retrospect is the magical montage of married life, and the exquisite music.

Up in the Air — An American original about loopy Americans on the move, it disproves the new saw that contemporary audiences don't respond to topical satire.

Best Actor

	JOE MORGENSTERN SHOULD WIN	JOE MORGENSTERN WILL WIN	READER PICKS*	ODDS*	YOUR PICKS SHOULD WIN	YOUR PICKS WILL WIN
Crazy Heart — Jeff Bridges			✓	1:8		
Up in the Air — George Clooney	✓	✓		9:1		
A Single Man — Colin Firth				9:1		
Invictus — Morgan Freeman				25:1		
The Hurt Locker — Jeremy Renner				25:1		

Best Actress

	JOE MORGENSTERN SHOULD WIN	JOE MORGENSTERN WILL WIN	READER PICKS*	ODDS*	YOUR PICKS SHOULD WIN	YOUR PICKS WILL WIN
The Blind Side — Sandra Bullock		✓	✓	4:7		
The Last Station — Helen Mirren				50:1		
An Education — Carey Mulligan	✓			8:1		
Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire — Gabourey Sidibe				20:1		
Julie & Julia — Meryl Streep				7:4		

Best Director

	JOE MORGENSTERN SHOULD WIN	JOE MORGENSTERN WILL WIN	READER PICKS*	ODDS*	YOUR PICKS SHOULD WIN	YOUR PICKS WILL WIN
Avatar — James Cameron			✓	10:3		
The Hurt Locker — Kathryn Bigelow	✓	✓		1:5		
Inglourious Basterds — Quentin Tarantino				28:1		
Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire — Lee Daniels				100:1		
Up in the Air — Jason Reitman				100:1		

Avatar — James Cameron — Is he an artist turned techie? A techie turned artist? Yes and yes. Few people in the history of modern film have been such formidable switch-hitters.

The Hurt Locker — Kathryn Bigelow — When this relatively unsung virtuoso finally got to make a film the way she wanted to, she became sung, and will now be serenaded on all sides.

Inglourious Basterds — Quentin Tarantino — His motormouth is connected to a motor-mind that idles only in the interest of suspense. Enchanted with violence, he's also an extraordinary storyteller.

Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire — Lee Daniels — His gift is clairvoyance of the literal kind—an ability to see his heroine clearly and to help his star help us to see her buried humanity.

Up in the Air — Jason Reitman — Putting thoughts of Oscars aside (as no one will), the best thing about his work here is that it confirms the great promise of "Juno."

*As of March 3

Photos: Associated Press (10); Bloomberg News (2); Reuters (5)

Message in a bottle

As budgets tighten, playwrights find TV work writing 'bottle episodes'

By Ellen Gamerman

To catch the latest work of a hot American playwright, there's no need to go the theater—just turn on the TV.

Keith Huff, who wrote last autumn's Broadway hit "A Steady Rain," just started a new job as a writer for the AMC cable-channel show "Mad Men." Seven of the nine people writing the next season of HBO's "Big Love" are playwrights. Of the 200 applicants for writing jobs for a coming FX drama, "Lights Out," about an aging former heavyweight boxing champion, one in three were playwrights.

"Theater is now viewed as a way of getting a staff-writing job on TV," says Warren Leight, the show runner and developer of "Lights Out," who won a 1999 Tony Award for the jazz-inspired play "Side Man." "For a lot of guys now, it's a means to an end. And the end is, 'How do I make a living as a writer?'"

Many playwrights say television is a good fit for their talents, since it's often driven by dialogue rather than by the visual effects that dominate film. Recent TV writers include critically acclaimed playwrights—such as Marsha Norman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of "night, Mother" who wrote for last season's "In Treatment" on HBO—and current theater darlings such as Jon Robin Baitz, who created the ABC network's long-running "Brothers & Sisters" and will debut a new play on Broadway next season.

Playwrights have found a second home on TV before: David Mamet created "The Unit" for the CBS network, and widely produced playwright Theresa Rebeck has written for TV since the 1990s with shows such as "NYPD Blue." But some in the TV world say that the traffic from stage to TV has never been heavier than it is now—a result, in part, of the rise in cable shows with literary aspirations and a TV marketplace that puts a premium on writers with original voices.

Erica Beckman

Playwright Keith Huff, of 'A Steady Rain,' now writes for the TV show 'Mad Men.'

In a tight economy, playwrights have emerged as key writers for episodes that feature only one or two locations. These "bottle episodes" have become increasingly necessary as producers are told to rein in costly, multiple-location shoots, because the scripts tend to rely more on dialogue than sprawling action sequences in diverse settings.

"I can say somewhat confidently that as the purse strings tighten on TV shows...it will behoove people to make their shows perhaps more play-like than movie-like," says Vince Gilligan, creator and executive producer of the AMC drama "Breaking Bad," which premieres its third season in the U.S. this month. The two playwrights on the show's eight-person writing team recently churned out a bottle episode.

HBO's half-hour drama "In Treatment," about a therapist and his patients, had a writing staff composed almost entirely of playwrights last season. Its dialogue-heavy scenes are almost all shot on one location, a set depicting the therapist's office.

Playwrights say what they earn in two weeks on a TV show can exceed the commission for a play, which is as little as $10,000 on the low end—for a work that often takes at least a year to write.

Filmmaker Steven Spielberg, a principal partner of DreamWorks Studios, recently selected Ms. Rebeck to write the script for a new Showtime pilot, now titled "Smash," that takes place behind the scenes of a fictional Broadway show. He had read her play "The Understudy," about an understudy rehearsal for a fictional play by Franz Kafka. "The Understudy," which in January ended its nearly sold-out Off-Broadway run, "spoke to all of us and informed us of her fantastic voice and her ability with dialogue," says Darryl Frank, co-president of DreamWorks Television.

WireImage/Getty Images

Marsha Norman, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of 'night, Mother,' wrote for HBO's 'In Treatment' last season.

The traffic also runs in the reverse direction: Broadway will see its share of playwrights with TV backgrounds in the coming months. "Enron," a play about the Texas energy giant opening this April, is written by Lucy Prebble, who created the TV series "Secret Diary of a Call Girl," which aired in the U.S. on the Showtime cable channel.

Some in theater say plays have been changing to reflect the influence of TV writing, and not always for the better. "I think TV has benefited enormously from the fact that playwrights are moving in that direction. I'm not sure theater has benefited as much," says Polly Carl, director of artistic development at Steppenwolf Theatre, the award-winning Chicago theater company. New work by playwrights who have written for TV can rely more on elaborate stage directions and less on the language, theater veterans say.

Mr. Gilligan of AMC says playwrights don't always make good TV writers. Playwrights focus on dialogue, he says, while TV writers think visually and tell more through silences and stage directions. "My writers and myself are all proud of instances in our scripts when an entire page or two or three pages of script go by and there's not a single line of dialogue," he says.

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Where the executives roam

A Utah gated resort community offers homes on 65-hectare lots

By Nancy Keates

Woodland, Utah

Deep in cattle country sits a gated community the size of Manhattan, where a small number of wealthy homeowners can enjoy the feeling of living in the middle of nowhere—except for the 24-hour security, parties and cellphone access.

That's the concept behind Wolf Creek Ranch, a 5,665-hectare development with just 84 lots of 65 hectares apiece, making the lots roughly 10 times larger than in most gated resort communities. An hour from Salt Lake City and about 20 minutes from the Deer Valley and Park City ski resorts, Wolf Creek positions itself as a "private national park"—a compromise between traditional luxury developments with all the amenities and megasize stand-alone ranches.

Owners are a mix of wealthy Utah residents and business executives, including sports executive Dave Checketts and former Citigroup Chief Financial Officer Gary Crittenden. While they say they relish mingling with nature, owners also get access to a club barn for get-togethers, an equestrian center, four yurts set up for deluxe camping stints, cellphone access (the tower is disguised as a pine tree) and 43 kilometers of paved roads. They socialize around the quarterly association meetings—the highlight being an annual autumn elk bugling party, in which everyone breaks into groups with bugles to call out to the male elks. (The elks are only for looking at—hunting isn't allowed.)

"I can go out on my snowmobile all day and not see anyone," said Tom Watson, head of the Memphis, Tennessee, moving company Armstrong Relocation, on a recent Friday afternoon here. Mr. Watson, who had just moved into his new 13,000-square-foot log home, stopped his black sport utility vehicle to admire two moose navigating a snow bank. "Where else can you see this and then drive away on a nicely paved road?" he asked.

Wolf Creek was the brainchild of Salt Lake City developer Douglas Anderson, who bought the sheep-farming land for $60 million from 16 owners. Eighty-one of 84 lots have sold, and this past year more than two dozen houses have been under construction, says Mr. Anderson. Three homes now are for sale, at prices between $2.2 million and $18 million, the latter for a 13,000-square-foot home with eight bedrooms, 15 bathrooms, an indoor riding arena and a guest house, says Will Lange, main listing agent for the development at Prudential Utah Real Estate.

The land abuts the 890,000-hectare Unita National Forest and sits between two small ranching towns with populations of less than 1,300. Wolf Creek's guards shoo away hunters and cyclists, which generates some grumbling among locals. "To ban cyclists from roads where there isn't a lot of traffic is just wrong," says Tom Noaker, who lives nearby.

Mr. Anderson says the development has opened its doors to community events and sponsors a number of local causes.

The night before the February meeting, Mr. Watson, 61 years old, and his wife Robin, 52, held a cocktail party. The Watsons, who primarily live in Memphis, initially bought their land for $1.5 million as an investment. But they liked spending time on the property so much—snowmobiling, hiking, snowshoeing—that they decided to build here, too.

Guests wandered through the new six-bedroom, eight-bathroom house that took about four years and $7 million to build. With lots of floor-to-ceiling windows, the house is designed with a series of arches that mimic the triangles of the pine trees in the landscape. Park City builder Jake Vainio says all the logs, doors and windows were prefabricated in Finland. He describes the result as a "Scandinavian home with an American lifestyle," explaining that in Scandinavia most homes aren't bigger than 2,000 square feet, while at Wolf Creek Ranch they are four times that size.

Inside, everything is big: stone pillars and wood beams, nine-meter ceilings in the great room and a dining table that seats 12. The spa is comparable to one at a luxury hotel. Designer Anne-Marie Barton, who chose faded antique Oriental carpets, antique furniture and a nutmeg color scheme to give an aged feeling, calls the house "casual European."

There are always house guests, often company employees with their spouses. "I help him shovel the snow or clean out the fireplace if he needs help," said Randy Vallejo, Armstrong's director of quality, who was there for the weekend with his wife. Mr. Vallejo went into the kitchen and started putting away groceries he'd bought to make the next day's breakfast for the Watsons and the other house guests.

Neighbor Norm Provan chatted with some of Mr. Watson's Memphis friends, joking that he could never invite Mr. Watson over because of all the houseguests that are always around. Mr. Provan, one of the earlier home builders and the only full-time resident, sighed: "It's getting kind of crowded up here now."'

Kirsten Hepburn for The Wall Street Journal

Clockwise from top: Homeowner meetings are held in this barn-style building; a property sign at Wolf Creek Ranch; the back of Mr. Watson's home

A team in play?

Why fans want to buy Manchester United from its American owners

By Jonathan Clegg

Agence France-Presse/Getty Images (Rooney); Reuters (fans)

Left, Manchester United's Wayne Rooney scores a goal; above, cheering United fans fly the protesters' colors.

First, sports fans wanted their teams to win. Then they wanted fancy new stadiums with sleek amenities and gourmet food. Now, they want a healthier balance sheet.

The family of American businessman Malcolm Glazer, owner of the English Premier League's fabled Manchester United club, is locked in a strange battle of wills with part of the club's rabid fan base. The Glazers acquired United in 2005 through a leveraged buyout, and the club is now saddled with more than $1 billion in debt—which fans fear will knock United off its perch atop the Premier League as creditors come calling.

So as Manchester United won the Carling Cup last Sunday with a 2-1 win over Aston Villa, an unusual battle played out in the stands at London's Wembley Stadium. Many Manchester United fans wore not the club's traditional red, but rather green and gold—the colors of Newton Heath FC, the club's original incarnation in the 1870s.

The retro color scheme has morphed into a symbol of resistance against the Glazers, who also own the Tampa Bay Buccaneers of the U.S.'s National Football League. A group called Manchester United Supporters' Trust, or MUST, is running a campaign to pressure the family into selling the club—to a collective of fans, the group hopes, rather than another investor.

The group has sold more than 30,000 green-and-gold scarves in the past month to disillusioned supporters, and on Feb. 28 at Wembley, 30,000 balloons in the Newton Heath colors were sent skyward.

Manchester United declined to comment for this article, but the Glazers don't seem amused. Green and gold is now a frequent sight at the club's 80,000-seat Old Trafford stadium, causing problems like one last month, when a security guard was fired after returning to fans an anti-Glazer banner that had been confiscated.

Fears of the Glazers' doing great damage to United so far seem misplaced. The team has made regular additions to its already bulging trophy case in recent years, and its crusty coach, Sir Alex Ferguson, has remained at the helm with stars like Wayne Rooney and Ryan Giggs still dominating its roster.

But the situation is testing the adage that, in sports, winning cures everything. Ticket prices keep rising, and corporate sponsors are being asked to shell out more to associate with the team, both tougher sells in a weak economy. Season-ticket renewals have dipped by roughly 7,000 this season, and luxury-box usage has fallen about 16%.

Meanwhile, membership of MUST has climbed to 53,000, and the organization just hired Blue State Digital—a consultant that worked for U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign—in an attempt to propel it past 100,000.

"The green-and-gold campaign is so powerful because it's a protest against the current ownership that's totally compatible with supporting the team," says Duncan Drasdo, the chief executive of MUST. "It's a growing movement because it presents an alternative view of how the club should be run."

The protest at Wembley came just two days after Portsmouth FC became the first top-flight club in England to enter administration—a form of bankruptcy protection—as a result of debts of roughly $105 million. Also last week, details emerged of a study by European football's governing body that showed Premier League clubs are carrying more debt than the rest of Europe's 714 licensed clubs put together.

Protests against the Glazers began with the ink barely dry on their 2005 acquisition of United. Days later, some 10,000 fans marched on Old Trafford in a show of opposition to the proposed takeover. Some fans later established a supporter-owned semiprofessional team, while others targeted United board members for removal. "Love United, Hate Glazer" bumper stickers populated the streets.

The campaign has picked up further steam, though, as United's financial condition has come into clearer focus. In January, the club published its 2008-09 accounts, showing that if it hadn't sold star Cristiano Ronaldo for a record $122.5 million last year, the enormous interest payments on the club's debt would have produced a net loss.

Days later, the Glazers published a bond-raising prospectus that laid bare the full details of their ownership: the $1.1 billion of debt the owners have loaded on to a hitherto debt-free club, the $694 million of fees and interest for which United has since become liable, and the $34 million the family has taken out in fees and personal loans.

Although the $750 million bond offering reduced United's leverage, the impact of the club's huge borrowing had crystallized in the minds of supporters. The balance sheet is as red as its famous shirts—which explains the rise of the green and gold. The simplicity of the hook ensured it immediately caught on, and the ambitions of those behind the protest have soared.

MUST is rooted in a group of disgruntled fans that has been around since the late 1990s. A predecessor organization owned shares in the club when it was publicly traded; the group is now funded largely from proceeds reaped when the Glazers acquired Manchester United.

In the past month, MUST says it has held discussions with three separate groups looking to buy the club and place it in the hands of the fans.

One group, known as the Red Knights, includes Keith Harris, a former chairman of England's Football League and currently head of the U.K. merchant bank Seymour Pierce. The group has promised supporters a "golden share" in the club so they can approve or veto future owners should it successfully wrest control from the Glazer family.

The Glazers remain adamant that the club isn't for sale and Monday issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to the club.

Last month, a spokesman for the family said the money raised by the sale of Mr. Ronaldo was still available.

"The cash will be spent on players who are available and who the manager thinks can improve the squad, not to prove to pundits that it exists," the statement said.

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Taiwan's greatest ascent

Having wowed the locals, Yushan now aims for global recognition

By Robert Kelly

Yushan, Taiwan

It's the highest peak in northeast Asia and its timber stocks once fueled the growth of an empire. Climbing its summit is a lifetime goal of millions, and yet Yushan, or Jade Mountain, may be the most famous peak you've never heard of.

So how then, did this 3,952-meter-high *arriviste*—now a parkland sanctuary for an outsize number of plants and animals—find itself shortlisted for the new Seven Wonders of Nature contest, alongside such better-known summits as the Matterhorn in the Alps, South Africa's Table Mountain and Vesuvius in southern Italy? The answer is a lot of happenstance and a little ad hoc, grass-roots promotion.

"We didn't enter ourselves," says Chen Chen-yu, a spokeswoman from the Yushan National Park interpretation and education department. "Someone recommended us and then we heard about it from the foundation. So we had to do something."

The global competition to nominate seven new natural wonders was launched in 2007 by the New7Wonders Foundation, an organization founded by the Swiss-born Canadian filmmaker Bernard Weber. Voting will continue into 2011, with the winner to be announced on Nov. 11, 2011. It's the second such sponsored contest from Mr. Weber's foundation. The first, an effort to name another set of seven wonders in a voting contest ended in 2007 with complaints that it was essentially a giant popularity-contest-cum-publicity-event.

The latest contest will likely bear similar criticism, but here in Taiwan it's being taken with straight-faced seriousness. This is not unusual. The island is shut out of most international organizations (it is not a member of the United Nations or the World Health Organization), but is eager to promote its tourism potential on the world stage.

Last spring, Yushan National Park and the Taiwan tourism board began a three-month campaign to draw support. Online voting stations were set up at visitor centers around the island. Facebook, Twitter, newspapers and TV were used to their advantage. In the promotion's signature event, seven students set off on a round-the-island bike trip, making cleverly timed stops at schools that coincided with computer classes.

According to Rechenda Huang, one of the student bike leaders, the purpose of the trip was twofold.

"What we seven ambassadors were trying to do was influence other young people to love Yushan," says 19-year-old Ms. Huang. "Our motive other than to get Yushan into the seven wonders of the world was to bring about greater awareness."

She meant among her own people. Yushan may be a symbol of Taiwan, but most residents know little about it, except that it is the highest mountain in Taiwan. It's not that visible, for starters: You usually can't see Yushan until you are in the mountains. (Mount Fuji, on the other hand, is visible to millions of Japanese in all seasons.) In addition, for most of Taiwan's history, Yushan stood squarely within aboriginal territory. To early settlers, it was a place best avoided if you wanted to keep your head. (Aborigines practiced ritual headhunting as part of their traditional way of life until the early 20th century.)

During the Japanese occupation (1895-1945), much of the area around Yushan was stripped of timber to supply the growth of the Japanese empire. When survey teams discovered that Yushan was 176 meters higher than the revered Mount Fuji, the mountain's reputation skyrocketed. The Japanese renamed it Niitakayama, or New High Mountain, and it became a popular hiking destination among Japanese and Taiwanese. The first trail to the peak opened in 1919, and by the 1930s, middle-school girls in school uniforms were climbing as a coming-of-age graduation trip, according to a plaque at the start of the trail.

Niitakayama's fame and honor was short-lived, however. In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist government fled to Taiwan, and along with two million refugees, brought a mainland-centric nationalism that would dominate education and culture for decades. Niitakayama became Yushan again in more than just name.

"When we were growing up, we learned about China's geography and its famous mountains," says Yin Hui-ming, a middle-aged high-school teacher from Taipei. "We knew Yushan was the highest mountain in Taiwan, but it didn't have the status it does now."

That status grew slowly, alongside a Taiwanese identity that is still struggling to define itself and its icons. Nevertheless, the mountain's snow-covered main peak now graces Taiwan's $1,000 note. Climbing to the peak has once again become a popular post-graduation activity. For Taiwanese companies, it's the only mountain worth sending employees up for a team-building exercise. And for countless ordinary citizens, it just has to be climbed at least once.

"Of course, most people just want to get to the top and say they did it," laughs mountain guide Xiao Gu, a Bunun aborigine who leads hikers up Yushan for about NT$3,000 to NT$4,000 a day (US$93 to US$125). When Mr. Gu's ancestors settled in the Yushan area three centuries ago, they considered the high mountain a sacred peak—to be climbed only for ceremonial purposes—and made it the center of their mythology. In Bunun, Yushan is called Tongku Saveq (the sanctuary), and it is considered the final resting place for the spirits of ancestors.

For most nonaboriginal Taiwanese, the mountain is just a place to go hiking. But there were still more than a million votes for Yushan in the New7Wonders contest last summer, propelling the peak into the second round of semifinalists. Three weeks later, on July 21, the mountain made the final shortlist of 21, chosen by a New7Wonders Foundation panel.

The peak, a striking bare crest atop a sweeping ridgeline, stands over 105,000 hectares of wild national parkland, which represents 3% of Taiwan's land area. Six biogeographical zones, ranging from subtropical forest to highland scrub, host an impressive 151 species of bird, 34 species of mammal, 228 species of butterfly and countless plants. (To put that in perspective, this diversity compares favorably with that of Yellowstone, a U.S. national park that is 10 times its size.)

"The park's main point is to protect this biodiversity," says Ms. Chen, the Yushan National Park education department spokeswoman. Indeed, in the past 10 years, the park has seen a resurgence in mountain wildlife including an increase in the number of a few endangered species such as the Mikado pheasant and the Formosan black bear. "Recreation," she says, "is secondary."

Only 90 hikers a day are allowed to climb Yushan and the peak is completely off-limits for several months each winter to "let it heal," says Ms. Chen.

Like most Taiwanese, Kitty Ching, 44 years old, had little interest in Yushan when she was growing up. After a decade in the U.S., she returned to Taiwan in 2003. She took up hiking and before long, made a vow to climb the island's highest peak.

On a blustery morning last July, she finally did. The first day's hike—normally a five-to-six hour endeavor—took more than eight hours because a companion got altitude sickness on the way up to Paiyun Lodge, the usual overnight stay that is 2.4 kilometers from the summit. But the next morning, the group (save the one with altitude sickness, who stayed behind recovering) made it up to the peak in about three hours. "We were the only ones there for the whole morning," says Ms. Ching.

For her, it was a revelation.

"If you are Taiwanese and don't go up to a place like this...there is something missing in your life," she says. "Taiwan is so beautiful and so mountainous and when you are up there you understand that."

Robert Kelly is a writer based in Taipei.

Trip planner

Yushan is in central Taiwan; international travelers should fly to Taipei or Kaoshiung. The best time to climb is in the autumn and spring; with summer comes typhoon season and in winter, temperatures can drop to below zero degrees Celsius.

Most hikers to Yushan use the services of local hiking clubs or companies because the park's permit process is complicated and there is no public transportation to the trailhead. The following groups organize tours and arrange transportation, accommodation and meals.

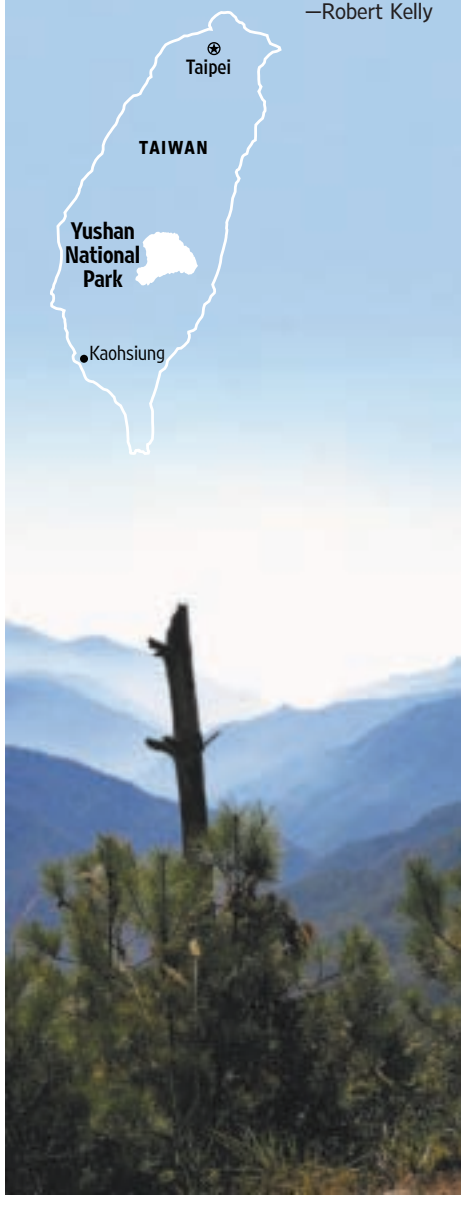
Cloud Leopard Hiking Association, a cooperative run by Bunun aboriginals, offers daily rates for porters at US$130 and guides at US$110. Packages including permits, transportation, accommodation and meals is also available. No English spoken. Web: www.go837.com.tw

523 Mountaineering Association is a nonprofit hiking association that organizes frequent trips to Yushan (full-package trips cost US$150 a person). Some trips have English speaking guides. Web: 523.org.tw

Barking Deer Adventures offers English-speaking guides and full-package trips for US$200 a person. It can also arrange just permits and transportation.
Web: www.barking-deer.com

Yushan National Park also runs guided hikes in the autumn, though these are difficult to get into. For more details, go to www.ysnp.gov.tw/en.

—Robert Kelly



Yushan National Park Headquarters (Yushan); Robert Kelly (2)

Yushan, in winter, top; hikers on the main trail to the summit, middle; a view of blue-tinged mountaintops from the trail, below.

Beating Bad Luck

By Tatiana Lau

Hong Kong

In the middle of the neon-lit Wanchai neighborhood, well-dressed office workers are lining up to undergo an arcane ritual. Three elderly women are hard at work beneath the Canal Street overpass, muttering incantations and using shoes to beat paper drawings of people. Exorcising bad luck is a serious business in Hong Kong, especially at this time of year.

This weekend marks Ging-dzat, literally "awakening of insects," the beginning of spring according to the lunar calendar. Unfortunately, in Chinese cosmology now is also the time that supernatural pests stir to life—including the White Tiger, a spirit that lurks in dark, humid spaces and attacks people's fortunes. The White Tiger can be appeased with pig lard, but what of the other pests? That's where *ta siu yan*, or "beating the little person," comes in.

Exclusive to Cantonese culture, the ceremony is thought to be at least 100 years old in Hong Kong, which is also the only place that combines the ceremony with Ging-dzat. And far from dying out, in recent years it has gained in popularity. Local media attention has given the Wanchai crones plenty of free advertising, leading to the commercialization of a tradition that many people used to perform at home. The government now claims it as part of Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage.

> A Chinese ritual survives by evolving to fit modern culture.

Curious to see how it works, I take a seat on a faded-pink plastic stool and pay HK$50 ($6.44), watching as one grannie nearby finishes cursing the enemies of a young 20-ish female on a break from her job. Having asked for my name and confirmed my marital status, my grannie begins the ritual by praying to the bodhisattva of mercy, Kun Yum. She then mutters and beats the "little people"—a piece of thin paper with people drawn on it that can either be inscribed with the names of backstabbing colleagues and petty pot-stirrers, or left blank. I opt out of the "voodoo doll" concept, preferring to concentrate all the effort on amorphous bad spirits. Eventually the paper is flayed into tiny pieces all over the sidewalk.

My exorcists refuse to give their names; one reports that she is over 70 years old, and I count the 10 teeth left in her mouth. As tourists stop and stare at the makeshift shrines to Kun Yum, she takes one of several yellow paper tigers arranged around a pile of pig lard and stuffs the remains of the "little person" drawing into it. Then she burns the tiger, along with some "hell" currency—paper with goldleaf pasted to it—to bribe the evil spirits to go away.

Do-it-yourself types can purchase their own kit—complete with incense, candles, paper tiger, money and little people—from stores dealing exclusively in incense and paper products and Kun Yum statues. Fu-Ling Chan, who has run a paper-product store for 30 years, says he has seen a recent increase in sales of the kits. Whereas he typically sold 200 to 300 for HK$3 in the past, he now sells 500 kits a year for HK$4.

Liu Tik-sang, a professor of humanities at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, says the ritual has become more popular in recent years, especially in urban areas. "Now people are under a lot of pressure," he explains, adding that the rite is performed more and more by urbanites instead of rural residents. Mothers do it as a psychological release to ensure their children will be safe, and the young adults seen hanging

AFP

around the Wanchai grannies after work want to ensure their job security. The unemployment rate in Hong Kong for those between 20 and 40 years of age is 10.4%.

The average Hong Konger has limited options to vent his frustrations and protect his career. "You can either go into the office or you can go to [a Wanchai grannie]," explains Cheung Siu-wai, a history professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This pressure means they are wary of performing the ritual incorrectly and therefore feel safer employing the expertise of the Wanchai grannies.

Professors Cheung and Liu agree that media publicity is another reason behind the growing popularity of patronizing the Wanchai grannies. Articles and Youtube videos documenting the process have convinced many young people that they should not take any chances with their own luck. And thus a ritual originally performed in private has become a public attraction.

The grannie with 10 teeth and 10 years of experience in the industry explains to me that on the day of Ging-dzat, people will stand in line three to four hours for the "treatment" I've just received. All that remains now is to invite the good spirits into my body. She drags a stack of red papers up and down my limbs and across my chest while muttering blessings for my health and luck. These papers then follow the tiger into the fire bin, and for good measure she throws rice in all directions to scatter the evil spirits, marking the end of 10 minutes of mumbling, beating and brushing.

The ritual complete, my bad luck has been banished. I'm flush with good spirits, good to go—at least until the next time the bad luck spirits decide to creep up again.

Ms. Lau is a Princeton in Asia fellow at The Wall Street Journal Asia.

Masterpiece / *By Ian Johnson*

Murals That Inspire Awe

Ruicheng, China

For aficionados of Chinese art, the murals in the Yongle Palace have a special cachet.

Dating to the 14th century, they fill three halls in a Taoist temple complex with deities and scenes from everyday life, a swirling mélange of gods, demons and people. And their scale makes them awe-inspiring: Covering more than 4,300 square feet, they form the biggest single ensemble of murals in the country.

"These are 200 years earlier than the Sistine Chapel and on a comparable scale," says Stephen Little, a scholar of Taoist art and director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

But despite their repute, few people have seen the murals. The temple is almost impossible to reach without special effort. Its odd history has also added to its obscurity: It was moved from its original location to protect it from a huge dam project, but that made it ineligible for the tourist-boosting designation as a United Nations world heritage site. The upshot for those who do get here is a work of art in superb condition. Officials say they get just 30,000 visitors a year, and on a recent day the temple was all but deserted except for a group of art students.

The palace is a temple that honors one of China's most popular gods, Lü Dongbin. Famous for his morality and acerbic wit, Lü became known also as an immortal prankster, turning up in disguise to test locals' piety. By the 12th century, he was a leading god in the Taoist pantheon and his hometown, Yongle, became the site of a small temple.

At the time, Yongle was a wealthy trading town at the foot of an important mountain pass and a key crossing of the mighty Yellow River. It had been home to a prosperous merchant class and a growing number of Taoists. By 1345, they gave the now-important god the temple he deserved and constructed the palace, a series of three halls set in the foothills of the Zhongtiao mountains.

The halls are rare examples of architecture from the Yuan Dynasty. Chinese architecture is largely wood, so relatively little has survived its millennia of history. But the area around Yongle is dry, so the buildings didn't rot and are largely original. The structures look different from the ones that most tourists see, such as the Forbidden City in Beijing. Those buildings lack the massive, imposing roofs or flattened stone lions that grace the Yongle Palace. Most have also been renovated so often that little appears original; the Yongle Palace, by contrast, has a wind-weathered authentic feel to it.

But the real masterpieces are inside. Like the stained glass in medieval Christian churches, the palace's murals are meant to impose but also to teach. The first building, the Hall of the Three Pure Ones, is the largest and most awe-inspiring. It contains numerous gods in the Taoist pantheon, which makes it a cornucopia of Chinese figurative painting. Here are serene goddesses, obedient attendants and argumentative followers. Several men seem engaged in a heated discussion; two men lock eyes in debate, while others strike poses of contemplation and detachment.

Liu Zhongkai

Queen Mother of the West, from the Hll of the Three Pure Ones.

Probably the temple's most famous image is from this hall: the Queen Mother of the West, one of Taoism's most popular goddesses. She stands serenely in flowing robes, a crown on her head adorned with the symbol for *kun*, or female.

Gods are an important part of Taoism, which is based on the worship of the Tao, or Way, the primordial life force that unites humans and nature and is the DNA of Chinese culture. The goal is immortality by melding with the Tao, which can be achieved by study, meditation and physical self-cultivation. These goals are complemented by a lively worship of gods who symbolize different facets of the theology.

This becomes clearer in the next building, the Hall of Pure Yang, which is devoted to Lü. The 2,200-square-foot mural shows scenes of the god's life, and includes captions that explain the stories, such as one of Taoism's most famous, the Dream of Yellow Millet. In it, Lü falls asleep while cooking his millet and dreams of a career in officialdom in which he reaches the pinnacle of earthly success and then is disgraced. About to die of hunger on the street, he wakes up to see that his millet is not yet ready—and realizes that human existence is equally short and fleeting. He gives up temporal life and follows the Tao.

For today's viewers, the paintings also give a glimpse of that era's architecture, clothing, food and dress, as does the last hall, the Hall of Redoubled Yang. The walls here are given over to the life of Wang Chongyang, who founded the School of Complete Perfection, the dominant school of monastic Taoism today.

Until about 20 years ago, few people studied China's only indigenous religion, fewer still its art and architecture. That's slowly changing with the creation of Chinese religious studies in Chinese and Western universities—in fact, the palace's history and paintings are the subject of a book, "Images of the Immortal," by the Taiwan-based U.S. academic Paul R. Katz. Along with a new tunnel being bored through the Zhongtiao mountains, these developments are making it easier to reach—and appreciate—the temple.

"The Yongle Palace is like an echo of things that had to have existed in China but which did not survive the Mongol invasion," says Prof. Little. "By the early 20th century they were pretty much unique."

Mr. Johnson works in the Journal's Beijing bureau.

Associated Press (Law and Cheung); Mei Ah Entertainment (2)

Clockwise from top left, 'Echoes of the Rainbow,' about a Hong Kong family—including a shoemaker father, a homemaker mother and their astronaut-wannabe son—won a Crystal Bear for director Alex Law and producer Mabel Cheung.

Over the rainbow

Filmmakers Alex Law and Mabel Cheung on Hong Kong's cinema

By Dean Napolitano

Tributes continue to stream in nearly two weeks after Hong Kong filmmakers Alex Law and Mabel Cheung made headlines when their new movie, "Echoes of the Rainbow," won the Crystal Bear for best film in the Generation Kplus category at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The recognition came from a jury of 11 children between the ages of 11 and 14. And it was an opportunity for Hong Kong to shine on the global stage at a time when the local film industry struggles to compete with action-driven blockbusters and other big-budget movies from mainland China.

"Hong Kong people took it as their own film—a present for the Chinese New Year," which coincided with the festival, Ms. Cheung says. "We got the Oscar treatment."

Once the center of Chinese-language cinema, the Hong Kong movie industry in recent years has faced enormous challenges from the mainland, where top local talent—directors, producers and actors—has flocked in response to its booming film market.

"Echoes of the Rainbow" was made with a tiny budget of HK$12 million (US$1.5 million) and received part of its financing from the Hong Kong government's Film Development Fund, which was established a few years ago to provide support for small and midsize productions. The movie's stars—veteran Hong Kong actors Simon Yam and Sandra Ng—both accepted salaries that were less than they're usually paid. "We wouldn't have been able to make it without them," Ms. Cheung says.

Mr. Law, who wrote and directed the movie, and Ms. Cheung, the producer, are known for their character-driven stories.

The two met at New York University in 1982 and have since collaborated on a number of critically acclaimed films, including "An Autumn's Tale" (1987), "The Soong Sisters" (1997) and "Beijing Rocks" (2001).

"Echoes of the Rainbow" is Mr. Law's autobiographical story about growing up in Hong Kong, a nostalgic nod to the former British colony.

"It was 1969," he says, the year Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon. "I used to run around the street with a fishbowl over my head pretending I was an astronaut....I wanted to be the first Chinese man on the moon."

"Echoes of the Rainbow," which has been nominated for several Hong Kong Film Awards—being given out next month—opens in Hong Kong on March 11 and is scheduled to be released in mainland China in mid-April.

Where did you get the idea for this story?

Mr. Law: This film is based on my own childhood, when I was 8 or 9 years old. It's about my relationship with my parents and my older brother. My father was a shoemaker, and my mother was a housewife. I had a very, very close relationship with my older brother. He was a star student and an athlete—he was very knowledgeable and taught me many things. Then he became sick with cancer.

What does this award mean for the movie?

Ms. Cheung: It is a great help to the movie, but I don't know how much impact it will have. It took us 10 years to get it financed.

What appeals to you about human dramas?

Mr. Law: You have to be touched by a story yourself before you turn it into a movie and touch the audience. The movies that touch me are about all kinds of relationships...even between a boy and an E.T.

What is your response to those who say the golden age of Hong Kong cinema is over and the industry has moved to Beijing?

Mr. Law: Life has a strange way of working out. I wouldn't be too surprised if everyone rushed back to Hong Kong someday. Hong Kong has the creative people and the technical talent.

Would you consider making a movie in mainland China?

Mr. Law: I wouldn't restrict myself to one place. The world is getting smaller and people are making movies everywhere.

We would consider China, but first of all we must have a good story.

What is your next film project?

Ms. Cheung: We have eight to 10 scripts fully written. We are waiting for an investor. Maybe this award will help.

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